

Otaru Art Base, in the City of Glass

Hokkaido is located in the northernmost part of the Japanese archipelago, and Otaru City lies around the middle of its western coast, facing the Sea of Japan. The city prospered as Hokkaido's distribution center from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Precious buildings that were constructed in those days still remain in the city and are being used as sites for passing down history, artistic culture.

(Text: Kato Yukiko)

Otaru City is a port town located northwest of Hokkaido's main city of Sapporo. It is a 75-minute train ride from New Chitose Airport, Hokkaido's largest hub airport, and a 90-minute drive to the ski resort of Niseko. Hokkaido was a major coal-producing region which supported Japan's modernization from the late 19th century, and Otaru Port was the port of shipment for that coal. Herring fishing was also a thriving industry, and at the beginning of the 20th century Otaru became one of Japan's leading distribution hubs, serving as Hokkaido's gateway to the sea, and enjoying a period of prosperity. In those days, many warehouses were built along Otaru's canal. Financial institutions and trading companies also moved in. Many examples of this modern architecture still remain today. Many of the buildings are said to be the work of the best architects of their time, befitting the prosperity of those bygone days.

Otaru Art Base, which utilizes those historical buildings, was established in 2016. Isozaki Ayako, curator of Otaru Art Base, says, "Private citizens have taken the initiative in efforts to preserve a great deal of Otaru's remaining modern architecture, which have been used for city planning."

Since Otaru is also known as the "City of Glass,"¹ Otaru Art Base has a large collection of stained glass, as well as glass art works in the Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles,² which have a strong affinity with Otaru. The museum has a collection of more than 500 items, and the exhibits are sometimes changed. "The museum houses mainly Western art and craftworks from the period of Otaru's rapid development, as well as *ukiyo-e* prints and other Japanese classical art. Viewing these pieces, you can feel the energy of an era when people all over the world were coming up with new forms of expression one, after the other." The glass collection is popular with tourists from Asia, while the Japanese art is popular with tourists from Europe. Many tourists take commemorative photos in front of the glass collection.

There are also many events for visitors to enjoy, including projection mapping on the first floor of the former Mitsui Bank's Otaru Branch that lets visitors appreciate a fantastic spectacle of lights, inspired by the four seasons of Hokkaido, projected on the plastered ceiling. Various other events are also planned including lectures and evening concerts held in the atmospheric old office room.



The Otaru Canal in the afternoon. The footpath lets visitors enjoy a walk along the canal.

House of Western Art



The Museum of Western Art utilizes one of the city's largest existing stone warehouses, where it exhibits stained glass windows, Art Nouveau and Art Deco glass crafts, furniture and other art objects produced in Europe and the United States from the late 19th to the early 20th century.

Nitori Museum of Art



The Nitori Museum of Art utilizes the building of the Former Hokkaido Takushoku Bank Otaru Branch.

Stained Glass Art Museum



The museum uses an old grain warehouse (in the back) and office (in the front) built in 1923. The warehouse has a fireproof timber framed stone structure.³

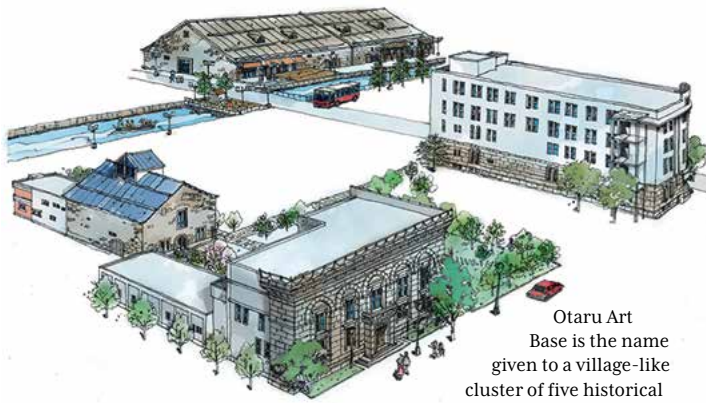


The Stained Glass Art Museum houses mainly windows made in United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the late 19th to the early 20th century that were used for actual church windows.



An image is projection-mapped onto the atrium ceiling.

Otaru Art Base



Otaru Art Base is the name given to a village-like cluster of five historical buildings being used as art museums.

Former Mitsui Bank Otaru Branch



The Former Mitsui Bank Otaru Branch is designated as an Important Cultural Property by the Japanese government. The bank operated from 1927 to 2002, and the building is now open to the public.



Its structural architecture was cutting-edge in its time. Visitors can see the safe-deposit box, which is left in its original state.



Art Nouveau church stained glass windows by Louis C. Tiffany⁴ are displayed on the first floor. The iridescent glass and mosaics are beautiful.

Peacocks and peony flowers—two auspicious motifs—are depicted in this large painting on gold leaf. Tani Buncho *Kujaku-zu* (Peacock), a piece of *tsuitate* (portable partition screen) art. (125.5 x 241.0 cm, production year unknown)

“A lot of people from overseas come to visit nearby Sapporo or Niseko, but we want them to also know what Otaru has to offer,” says Isozaki. “At Otaru Art Base, we want to accommodate many visitors coming from all over the world, so we are making preparations. We are scheduling the introduction of information displays and audio guides in Japanese, English, and three other languages (Korean, traditional Chinese, and simplified Chinese) by the end of March 2024.” A plan is also underway to attract visitors from nearby Niseko to Otaru by displaying high-resolution replicas of the Otaru Art Base art collection in the Niseko area, which attracts many overseas visitors but offers few opportu-

nities to experience traditional Japanese art.

You are invited to visit Otaru to experience its history and fully enjoy the arts and culture that have been cultivated there. **7**

1. In the early 20th century, the city was a center of distribution, and therefore demand for packaging materials increased, and glass containers were produced in mass quantities to be used to hold liquids and powders. In the second half of the 20th century, the use of plastic led to glass' decline, but glass manufacturers used timber-framed stone warehouses as their storefronts, and these have become popular with tourists, giving rise to the image of Otaru as a city of glass.
2. Art Nouveau is a style of art that was popular in Europe from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, characterized by the use of curves and organic motifs such as flowers and plants. The Art Deco style was popular in Europe and the U.S., which features the linear and geometric designs.
3. Most of the stone buildings in Otaru are timber-framed stone structures. The framework is made of wood, and the exterior walls are made of piled up stones and fixed to pillars. Stone was used for the warehouses because it helps to maintain a steady temperature inside.
4. A leading American Art Nouveau glass artist known for his stained glass and glass mosaic lamps.